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## dans les yeux

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“The thing about being a cradle Catholic is that there comes a point when you go to Mass, take Eucharist, and go to Confession and all you have in your heart is hatred. But you know what? I just think it’s better to do the shit even if I don’t give a shit. And then after some time, you realise that just doing it is of more value than not doing the things...”

This isn’t the normal kind of conversation you sit down to in an English pub, but neither is it that exceptional. Particularly in this kind of city. Claire sported a thick Irish accent, lubricated by two ales which compressed the characteristic sing-song lilt into a foghorn that resounded in the wood-panelled front room of the King’s Arms.

Alister had just come in from the rain after what some might call a ‘domestic’ at home. The foul weather was fitting for his mood. She had said she just needed some time to be alone, and, as in the past, Alister respected such wishes and vacated the home to his wife’s solitude. Or was it to run away? Should he have stayed and pursued her heart with gentle words and tenderness? Perhaps, but he had tried in the past and come up against bitter barbs of passive aggression and clenched shoulders which he always interpreted as hatred. He normally prided himself on his ability to de-escalate conflict and to draw out laughter from her to act as a balm to the fight. But he had raised his voice, which he seldom did. When he raised his voice, that was always the sound of defeat and the point of no return, at least for the next twelve hours. She was attracted to self-control and level-headedness. An angry man was an unattractive one.

So once again, Alister had found himself in the familiar embrace of the King’s Arms.

He'd reliably find Stephen here, and in fact, had messaged ahead of time to see if they could get a final drink before the bells rang calling for final orders. As Alister walked in, he saw Stephen standing at the bar already buying four largers with an apologetic look on his face.

"I'm sorry..." Stephen began. "I know we planned to have a chat, but I ran into some colleagues after Mass and ended up sitting with them. Do you mind?"

Alister shrugged, "Of course! Don't worry about it." Secretly frustrated but gratefully taking the tankard from his hands. The two men walked from the bar to the front room of the pub, dimly lit with inefficient light bulbs covered by dark blue cotton shades. Maybe they were trying to recreate what it must have been like to burn paraffin oil. It did, however, create a dream-like, clandestine aura. Incandescent orange light filled the dark room such that the room itself was immersed in the hue of ale. Tables were crammed ever so slightly too close to each other. Rectangular oak tables for four were arranged around the outside of the room; round tables with cast iron tripod legs filled the centre. Dark wooden stools with red-upholstered tops accentuated the warmth of the room, not that you could see any of the tops as they were all occupied.

The room was heaving. You couldn't walk through the room without rubbing against the backs of patrons. Alister and Stephen inched their way through the treacle of noise, making sure to not knock over drinks. Stephen, carrying three glasses as a trinity between his hands, was moving with particular anxiety and skill. The wooden floor, the wooden walls, and the wooden ceiling amplified every voice until the room was a cacophony of voices and laughter. Two women were waiting for them at the table. Despite the noise, as is often the case in these kinds of rooms, when the two men sat down, they were in a secret cabin; four individuals huddled together straining to hear each other speak, yet delighting in the intimacy of the inner circle.

"...And earlier this week, those fucking Russian Orthodox guys really pissed me off!", Claire continued. She suddenly caught Alister's eye, "Wait sorry, you don't know them! They're great guys, I love them, I promise. I live with them! They throw great dinner parties. I mean, sure, some of them are Putin-loving Russian nationalists but most of them are great." Stretching out her hand, she shouted, "Nice to meet you, by the way!"

Stephen quickly introduced Alister to the table. First to Claire, the Irish cradle Catholic living in a house of Russian Orthodox men in this University town. Then to the only other woman at the table, Chloé, yet another Roman Catholic. She was a Parisian, both in origin and in spirit. Slender, dark-haired, porcelain skin, vacantly holding an unlit cigarette in her right hand with elbow-on-table and hand twisted out as if from a 1950s smoking ad. An air of aloofness. She was a young graduate historian come to research some Medieval manuscript or another, who had found herself thrust upon this strange gaggle of people that night. She had struck up a conversation with Claire coming out of Mass who had invited the poor woman out. Chloé was not one for crowded claustrophobic spaces, and she had not expected such colourful conversation from Claire and would have rather made her way home. However, she had said to herself earlier that week that she would make more of an effort to meet new people so refrained from leaving. She was inwardly pleased to see another person join the table who could potentially shift the dynamics of the conversation. Of course, she did not give any of this away. Instead, she relied on the hope that her discomfort and insecurity would be interpreted as mysterious and intimidating, as most men often do of attractive women. Alister smiled, offering his hand to Chloé. She took it with gentleness and nodded, returning the smile. Meanwhile, Alister laughed to himself. Sitting amongst three intensely Catholic Medieval historians, it could have been the start of a joke. At least this would be a good distraction and meant that he could fall into the pillow-talk of meandering pub conversations.

“Cheers, friends!” Stephen said, handing out the drinks. Alister took his drink and mechanically clinked glasses with Stephen and Claire.

“*Dans les yeux*”, He suddenly heard from his left. He turned to see Chloé holding up her drink which he interpreted as an invitation to touch glasses. He instinctively tried to do. She pulled away her glass.

“*Dans les yeux!*”, she said again, with insistence. Alister looked at her with a flash of confusion. Seeing this, she explained cheerfully, “Ah, you have to look in the eyes, ‘*dans les yeux*’, when you cheers someone, otherwise it’s bad luck for seven years”. Her French accent was, again, out of a 1950s cigarette ad or a film noir.

“Ah, is this a French thing?” Alister said with a smirk. “Sorry, I did French at school but was never good at it. In fact, England is awful at teaching languages. I did it for ten years and all I have to show for it is that I can tell you that I went on holiday to America and I can maybe ask you ‘where is the swimming pool?’. They didn’t care much to teach any social etiquette, particularly drinking etiquette to 13-year-old boys”. A classic ice-breaker when talking with French people. Chloé gave a gentle, magnetic laugh.

“Well, now you know. So, *dans les yeux!*” she said, holding up her glass again. They touched glasses *dans les yeux*. She noticed he had warm, dark eyes. Alister found himself caught off guard.

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8 April 1904.

*The man stumbled into his room grasping at ink and paper. The window was open and the cool desert air exorcised the oppression of the noonday sun. Aleister Crowley had been in Cairo for over two months in search of the hidden mysteries that those bourgeois, capitalist Golden Dawn had claimed to have for so long. They were frauds. Middle-class Londoners playing druid. He had always thought he had been set apart for a special purpose. He had felt this since he was a child. “You are the great beast of 666” he had heard in a dream several years ago. He was to be the great leader of the new Aeon of history. The secret knowledge of magick was apocalypsed to him and the Gods were with him and had honoured his devotion to the pursuit of wisdom. He had read all the works of Éliphas Lévi, the great French occultist of the 19th Century and had fully aligned himself with the pansophy of Hermes Trismegistus - That himself, the great Moon of Egypt. However, those frauds in Europe had emptied him of his power and reduced him to pure ceremony and play. They had turned the great powers of heaven into a watered-down Enlightenment sham. They didn’t know what true power was. They didn’t know what lay in the depths of the human spirit and his loins. That was why he was here, the cradle of true spiritual power and wisdom, the ancient lands. And tonight he was overcome. Undone. He fell at his desk, hands trembling.*

“Who is it that speaks?” he whispered into the silence.

“Behold! it is revealed by Aiwass the minister of Hoor-paarkraat.”

*The man scrawled on paper. "Come forth, o children, under the stars, and take your fill of love! I am above you and in you. My ecstasy is in yours. My joy is to see your joy."*

*The ink flowed. The dark figure slumped over his desk prophesying his purpose. Heavenly knowledge began pouring into his open mind and manifested through his fingertips. Has there ever been paper more blessed by such illuminations? The man shook with delight and rapture. He was the vessel of light. A new aeon was about to break forth upon the earth. An aeon of freedom, liberation, and delight; the old must pass away, the new must come. As above, so below. As above, so below.*

*"Invoke me under my stars! Love is the law, love under will. Nor let the fools mistake love; for there are love and love. There is the dove, and there is the serpent. Choose ye well! He, my prophet, hath chosen, knowing the law of the fortress, and the great mystery of the House of God.*

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*"Curse them! Curse them! Curse them!  
With my Hawk's head I peck at the eyes of Jesus as he hangs upon the cross.  
I flap my wings in the face of Mohammed & blind him!  
With my claws I tear out the flesh of the Indian and the Buddhist, Mongol and Din.  
Ballast! Ompehda! I spit on your crapulous creeds.  
Let Mary inviolate be torn upon wheels: for her sake  
let all chaste women be utterly despised among you!  
Also for beauty's sake and love's!  
Despite also all cowards; professional soldiers who dare not fight,  
but play; all fools despise!  
But the keen and the proud, the royal and the loft; ye are brothers!  
As brothers fight ye!  
There is no law beyond 'Do what thou wilt.'  
"Do what thou wilt, that is the only law"*

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"These Russians!" rolled on Claire. "They had asked me to cook for St Guthlac's feast day. So I made them a whole pot of beef stew for the evening and spent 40-fucking-

pounds on this meal. Then their dear blessed Patriarch of Jerusalem ordered a Holy day of fasting all of a sudden. So there I was with beef stew for ten people in my kitchen. I don't even eat beef! So I took it around to the Catholic chaplaincy trying to get rid of 5 litres of the stuff and wasted my entire Tuesday." The table listened joyfully and obediently.

"Guthlac? He was the English Catholic monk, wasn't he? What did he do again?" Chloé chimed, trying to pass the baton onto someone else. Alister took it up.

"He was one of those hermit monks up in Northumbria. Quite an intense guy. He was a soldier before God called him to the monastery, but later, he ended up deciding to live on an island by himself to devote himself to prayer and fasting - proper ascetic. He was one of those hermits who fought a tonne of demons and apparently 'cleansed the land' of evil forces."

"Look at you Ali, we'll make a Medievalist out of you yet!" Stephen said gleefully.

Chloé was intrigued, "What do you do, Ali?"

Before Ali could get a word in, Stephen exclaimed, "Ah! Ali here is a Theologian! One of the nicest and smartest guys I know, but unfortunately, he's a dirty, dirty Protestant!" The last words were said almost shouting over the noise of the room but loud enough to turn a few heads. Confused heads no less. Stephen was several drinks in.

"You know what, Ali? I don't even know what you do." Stephen non-sequitured. Alister liked Stephen when he was like this. No decorum needed, no filters, no veneer of Christian sensibility. He also appreciated Stephen doing the introductions for him. Ali hated talking about himself. He was always afraid of being seen as narcissistic and self-aggrandising, qualities that he found utterly repulsive perhaps precisely because they were barely dormant within him.

"Don't listen to him. Neither that nice nor that smart", Ali said winking at Stephen, turning to Chloé. "I'm just doing a bit of reading around 20th-century Latin American authors and what theological concepts they're using in their writing. I've just spent enough time with these guys to have a little of Guthlac knowledge."

“Interesting! which authors? For me, my favourite book is 100 Years of Solitude. Have you read it?” Chloé brightened. It was the first time this evening that she felt she could contribute something to the table. She was, however, embarrassed that she had just let her English grammar slip. “Have I read it? Of course! It’s one of my favourites.” Alister said, leaning in and surprising himself. He tentatively began to explain his research which quickly turned into a gush as he noticed Chloé also leaning in to listen and responding *dans les yeux*. By this point, they were practically having to speak into each others’ ears to be heard above the noise. Warm breath and the smell of hair casting a spell. Meanwhile, Claire and Stephen had withdrawn to gossip about the Russians.

Alister was becoming increasingly familiar with this kind of magnetism. He had never been a confident or particularly charismatic person, and it was only in the last several years he had found his footing. Particularly when it came to women, he had found his voice and had noticed himself garnering more attention from more women.

It’s often the case that a man in his late twenties, particularly a married man, begins to experience greater attraction from younger women. From insecure, irresponsible boyhood, he can be tended to and pruned by a devoted woman who helps them become twice or thrice the man he would have been had it not been for their influence. He becomes an attentive, emotionally literate, and probably more successful and handsome human individual. And, of course, this is precisely her intent and desire. She is investing some of the most valuable years of her life in the promise of a partner who will be the father of her children and the lover of a lifetime. The twisted irony is that the new man the woman has birthed in him, by her sacrifice, and faithfulness, are the very things that put all her labour at risk. He begins to receive the attention of women that he would never have dared approach at twenty-two years old; the temptation arises. He then contemplates plundering and stealing away the inheritance that his wife had been saving, and laying it, golden and shining, at the feet of a younger, more enticing woman. And yet, this man is a fool for there are few things more unappealing, more repulsive to a woman than infidelity and desperation. And so the golden treasure he has stolen from his wife is alchemically transmuted into lead and mercury that slips through his fingers and poisons his soul. Alister knew all this because Stephen had been one such man. Yet he found himself intoxicated by the warmth of her face, occasionally feeling her lips brush his ear as she spoke. Alister gained a measure of self-awareness. Out of decorum and a sense of



self-awareness. Out of decorum and a sense of inner virtuous obligation, he dropped into this clandestine conversation a small anecdote about his holiday with his wife earlier that year.

“Where is she tonight?”, Chloé asked, pulling back slightly. Immediately, Ali was annoyed with himself for breaking open the hermetic chamber of this intimacy. He brushed it off. “Ah, she’s at home finishing off some work.” At least he had felt like he had done his duty to fidelity. The conversation felt aborted.

“Have you heard about the Americans who are trying to cancel the phrase ‘Anglo-Saxon’”, Ali heard Stephen exclaim suddenly, and rather randomly. Ali and Chloé turned to see Claire rolling her eyes with her whole head.

“What is it this time? Honest to God, I can’t stand those Americans. Just because they have the cash they think they can dictate everything everywhere. What’s their stupid reason this time?” Her voice rang with sarcasm with slightly too much sincerity.

“Well, this is actually quite a funny story”, Stephen continued. He had clearly had this up his sleeve for occasions just like this. “A couple of years ago, there was an Anglo-Saxon conference in Hawaii. As in, a convention for Medieval Historian scholars studying the Anglo-Saxon period”.

“Sounds riveting,” I chimed.

“Oh, it really was,” Stephen parried. “So there they were. Hundreds of old, white academics in their suits with their papers presenting on the new archaeological dig in, I dunno, Coldingham monastery. They rock up to the convention centre and turns out that the ‘Anglo-Saxon Conference’ had made its rounds in the American White Supremacist circles.” Our eyes lit up as we leaned in. “Turns out, some American racist groups had started using the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in their White Nationalist propaganda and had thought this conference was for them and all turned up together en masse!” Cracks of laughter peeled around the table. “And so, since then, the American Academy are really skittish about using the phrase. They say it’s racist.”

“So what else do they suggest?” Chloé asked.

“Oh. They have a whole bunch of different suggestions.” Stephen’s eyes twinkled. “My favourite is ‘the Germanic tribes who migrated to England in late antiquity.’”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Rolls off the fucking tongue doesn’t it?!” Claire came in abruptly, but Stephen seized the conversational reins again one last time.

“The irony of all this is the fact that the majority of English academics - the actual Anglo-Saxons”, emphasising each word of the phrase, “are very much in favour of keeping the term!” Claire turned serious, “Those Americans! They talk and talk and talk about decolonising their curriculum and they’re just imposing their own warped 21st-Century-Imperial-Pax-Americana-Supremacy. It honestly makes me so angry.”

Stephen began to smirk. He enjoyed getting a rise out of Claire. Claire had been a friend that he had stolen from his ex-wife. Or perhaps she had stolen him. She had found Stephen to be more interesting and a better conversation partner than his ex-wife had ever been. So, after Stephen pursued the young student he was supervising, and after his marriage broke down, and after all their friends, predictably and reasonably sided with her, Claire took it upon herself to continue drinking with Stephen on nights like this. Stephen was grateful for this, though he never expressed it. He was grateful that she never condemned him or threw him aside. Yet, he was also grateful that she would throw verbal tridents straight through his heart every time his now-pathetic love life came up. “Shouldn’t have ploughed into that other girl now, should you, Stephen?”, she would jab. This wounded Stephen every time but he enjoyed the absurd sadism of it. Perhaps because he felt like he deserved it.

Tonight, however, Stephen was content in winding Claire up like a Victorian toy soldier and letting her loose on the pub. It’s not often you find people with equal parts sheer intellect and unadulterated indignity. Once she got started, there was no stopping the colourful train of polemic, but shockingly well-thought-through verbal freight. Claire continued to rage. Stephen egging her on with more niche anecdotes about such-and-such Americans making this-and-that faux- pas. There are few things more unifying in the British Isles than a shared disdain for our brethren across the pond. People sitting at other tables began to look over at the playful vitriol that was flowing from our table.

Chloé was once again becoming weary and bored, looking in the direction of Claire but into the middle distance. She had her left hand wrapped delicately around her empty drink with dregs still sitting at the bottom of the glass. Her head was resting on her right hand while she fondled her cigarette in her fingers, the tip making small circles around her ears. She had been enjoying her conversation with Ali, but he had to go and ruin it by mentioning his wife. He had withdrawn since. The English are so rigid, she thought. Of course, she had no intention of doing anything with the poor man, but attention and connection are frightfully rare things. She tried to catch his eye throughout Claire's outpouring only to be met with warm yet restrained smiles. Ali meanwhile was somewhat grateful to Stephen and Claire's double act, yet he was furiously aware of Chloé dark eyes as he tried to keep attention on Claire and Stephen and laughed at the right cue. He had regained his composure, yet was desperate to return to the warm breath and leaning bodies. The room was now a fever pitch of noise. Claire was almost shouting expletives about the Americans. Stephen was clapping, finishing off his fifth drink of the night. The orange light was looking increasingly red as more bodies filled the room and dark coats covered the wooden tables and seats. In the other corner of the room was a table of ten men crowded around a table for four who would occasionally burst out in elephantine laughter that overwhelmed the room. Some of them would occasionally look across the room at the table full of student girls and start gesticulating big movements while telling some forgettable story about their week. There were couples huddled together with only the small round tables between them. Heads close, hands held, and exchanging sweet kisses and words. One man was sitting in a dark corner with book and pen, looking studious and severe. He would occasionally look up and around the room perhaps trying to catch someone's eye with the hope of striking up a serendipitous conversation. Or perhaps he was looking up in disdain at the clamour of it all. The room was a pressure chamber of blood and life.

"Do you want a smoke?" Chloé had turned to Alister, *dans les yeux*.

Alister didn't smoke. "Sure."

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Circa. 701.

*He had defeated countless demons upon this rock and upon this selfsame rock he had built his palace of prayer and heavenly warfare from humble stone. The deceitful One had come in many forms in his life and he had resolved to purge it from these lands and from the plains of his own inner sanctum. Even the, so-called, people of God had not been safe haven for his desire for holiness. He recalled in his early years how his brothers, yes, his brothers of Repton, had called unto him while in prayer.*

*“Brother Guthlac! Brother Guthlac! Come! Join us in our merrymaking. Thou art too solemn. Didst not the Lord himself turn water into the finest wine at Cana? Didst he not offer his blood in the selfsame manner? Didst he not speak through the prophet Isaiah and say ‘Come, receiveth wine and milk without cost’? Join us for our cup overfloweth.”*

*He had refused, holding firm to his devotion to prayer. His brethren had hated him with a deep hatred. He had wept when he left his brothers and yet his heart was filled with joy when he had begun his life of solitude here on Crowland.*

*There was no room for such libertine freedom in the Kingdom of Heaven. He had remembered the example of great Anthony of the Desert who devoted himself to prayer and simplicity, and of the great Lord Christ himself who in the desert was bestowed with spiritual power to defeat the evil one. How could his brothers have been so foolish? Had they not learnt from the example of Coldingham? A terrible shame for such a great monastery to have come under the judgement of the Lord. It was but 20 years ago that it was consumed by fire because of the lewd behaviour of the sisters who adorned themselves like brides and looked upon the brothers as suitors. Those who do not master the fire of desire will succumb to earthly flame and ultimately to the eternal fire. Such was the example of the great saints of our generation who, when fire came to burn their homes to the ground, their great sanctity protected them from harm. Indeed, no wonder that the tried and faithful servants of God should have power over ordinary fire.*

*Since the beginning of his solitude, the eternal liar had come in all his craftiness. On one occasion, he had come in the form of a holy man to teach Guthlac how to fast. He had sought to deceive Guthlac to fast excessively so as to deprive him of the power to pray!*

*The Lord does not wish such things upon his servants. On another occasion, Satan carried him to the gates of hell itself where, before him, he witnessed such horrors and sufferings that would cause him to fall into an eternity of despair. The Lord however, strengthened the courageous soldier to cast out the enemy from his mind and bring him back to the land of the living. All these years, the hermit had sought the face of the Lord and had found the burning eyes of the Living God.*

*This evening, however, the air was different. The wet cold seeped under the woollen cloak he was wearing. There is no escape from such Northumbrian winds. The cold was no ordinary cold. The visionaries have often spoken that hellfire is matched in equal measure with a realm of demonic ice. Such qualities were manifest.*

*Suddenly, apparitions of evil spirits appeared before Guthlac's eyes in manifold shapes and creatures and beasts. Ravens come to tear his eyes, lions to sheer at his flesh, bulls ready to drive their horns through the very belly of the man. His eyes widened and his courage melted. He flailed his arms about him. Surrounded by such a great multitude, his blood was transfused with despair. "Hadst thou abandoned me, O Lord?" the man cried out. The spirits descended upon his body and spirit, fabricating the most awful cacophony of noises to deafen the man. The ground began to tremor around him and he was once again reminded of the awful visions he had seen earlier in his life. He desired for this hurricane of evil to subside. In a whisper, he spoke out the familiar words that he had used long-ago to drive out the demons who once owned his island. "O most wretched Satan. I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ who banished thee from heaven, to desist from this tumult".*

*Then, as quickly as it came, the apparitions vanished into empty air like smoke; like the morning mist upon the ground. He lay, as dead, upon the heather.*